



\* Good words are worth much and cost little. — *Wisdom*.

# GOOD WORDS

FOR 1868

EDITED BY

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ONE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHAPLAINS FOR SCOTLAND

And illustrated by

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tempts to their destruction the unsteady of purpose and the weak of will, which enables the drunken wife to strip her husband's dwelling of all that renders it habitable, and which affords to the dishonest servant a ready market for the booty of which he has plundered his master. That the pawnbroker's shop exerts a most disastrous influence over our undeserving poor, no one who visits among them can doubt, nor can he fail to perceive that it tends to debase even those who are comparatively deserving, fostering their natural thriftlessness, making of no effect, by its silent yet eloquent appeal, words of advice and remonstrance, which might otherwise have become grafted in their minds, and have borne

good fruit. It will always be necessary that banks of some description should exist for the purpose of supplying the poor with small loans in the time of need, but it is difficult to see why it should be left to private individuals to carry them on, or why we who are cursed with a pauperism such as no other country suffers under, and whose lower orders are improvident and drunken to an extent elsewhere unknown, should be the only nation in Europe which has not made even an attempt to organize such a system of lending to the poor as might discourage their improvidence, and at least not afford any unnecessary facilities to their drunkenness.

## THE SHIP'S DOCTOR.

By Mrs. OLIPHANT.

THE Gushat-house stood, as its name denotes, at the angle where two roads met. These were pleasant country roads both—one, shadowed by trees here and there, threading through rich and broad fields, led up into the wealthy inland country, the rich heart of Fife; the other, with scattered cottages instead of the trees, growing after a while closer and closer together, was the straight road to the "town," and was open to the sea-view and the sea breezes. The town was the little town of Anstruther on the Fife coast; the sea was the Firth of Forth, half ocean half river; the time was fifty years ago. In this locality, and at that distant period, happened the very brief and simple story I have now to tell.

In the Gushat-house lived Mrs. Sinclair, and Nora, her daughter. The house was, in its humble way, a kind of jointure-house, though it belonged to no potent family, or county magnate. It had been for generations—since it was built indeed—the refuge of one widow or other, who had sufficient interest in the place to remain near it, or some connection with the soil. The present occupant had been the wife of the minister, and was the daughter of one of the smaller proprietors in the neighbourhood. She was a woman whom the county did not disdain to visit and honour; but yet she was not rich nor a great lady in her own person. In those days life was simpler, more aristocratic perhaps, but less luxurious, and far more homely. Now-a-days the coast-towns in Fife are unendurable. In summer they are nothing but great receptacles of herrings, not in their silvery state as they come in in glistening shoals in the boats from sea, but in the hideous course of economical preservation and traffic. Salt and smells, and busy women armed with knives, operating upon the once harmless "drave," line all the stony little streets, and send up to heaven an unsavoury testimony. You breathe herrings, if you are so unwary as to trust yourself in the season on that too prolific coast. But it was not so fifty years ago. Then the herrings came in to be eaten, not to be salted down in barrels, and they had

not got the upper hand of everything. There was no lucrative trade going on, no salt and pungent harvest-time of the sea, but the homely wynds were passable, even in summer, though cleanliness was far from perfect. In place of the herrings there was the whale fishery which sent out its ships periodically, and brought back with corresponding regularity the sailor fishermen to their families when the expedition of the year was over. It was a trade more picturesque, more dangerous, and less disagreeable, at least to the bystander. Nobody could refuse to be interested in the solemn ships going forth to their struggle with the ice, and the storms, and the monsters of the sea; nor in their exciting return, when the well-known rig would heave slowly in sight on the broad Firth, under eager telescopes, which reported the signs she carried, the jubilant garland on the mast, sign of a successful fishing, or the melancholy flag half-mast high, which thrilled the whole town with alarm, no one knowing whose son or husband, or what family's father it might be. An interest almost more exciting, and certainly more frequent, would thrill through the little salt-water place when a gale came on suddenly at some time when "our boats" were at sea. So that the "town" was not without its points of human interest, before the herring barrels, and hideous trade consequent thereupon, had appeared in the stony little streets.

And to Nora Sinclair it was a very interesting place. She was fond of the fisher-folk, whom she had known all her life, and who, for their part, were fond of her. She and her mother were local princesses, as it were, in the parish; for the reigning minister was unmarried and unsympathetic. In those days, before the advent of King Herring, even the position of the minister was different. There was no dissent in the place, except the little Episcopal church, "English chapel" as it was called, to which some of the adjacent gentry came, and which everybody regarded with half-indulgent, half-contemptuous tolerance. It was tacitly admitted as a kind of necessity that

the fine people should frequent this little conventicle; the common people granted them the indulgence with a half smile at their weakness of caste and training, but occupied the parish church themselves in close masses, filling the pews with characteristic rugged faces, and the air with a faint breath of fish and tar and salt water—the inalienable odour of a seafaring population. Nora Sinclair was in most things a young woman of refined tastes; but she had never had her eyes or her senses opened to these little imperfections. She took all the interest of a daughter of the place in its vicissitudes, and knew the boats and their crews, and was as anxious when it blew a gale as if she herself had known what it was to venture her heart on the dangerous chances of the sea. Her mother and she lived a not uncheerful life in the Gushat-house, metaphorically placed, as it was, with one eye on the country and one on the sea. The “families” about were many of them “connections” of Mrs. Sinclair, who was, as has been said, of a very good stock—old Auchintorlie’s daughter; and those who were not connections were old friends. The mother and daughter were not left alone when they had to change to the wistful widow’s refuge, from the manse. Kind friends and cheerful company surrounded them. In the depth of winter, when the Firth was often black with storms, and the weather too gloomy for enjoyment, the two ladies would go “across” in the ferry-boat from Kinghorn to Edinburgh, not without some trembling for the dangers of the passage, and settle themselves there for a few months, during which time Nora would have her gaieties, and be taken to a few balls, and take her share in the pleasures of her youth. Altogether it was a very endurable life.

It was in Edinburgh she first met with Willy Erskine, though he was a neighbour at home. He was one of the Erskines of Drumthwacket, of as good a family as any in Fife. One of Mrs. Sinclair’s perplexities was to make out in what way the Erskines and the Auchintorlie family were connected, but she never succeeded in clearing it up. That there was some connection she was sure, and Willy was very welcome when he paid those frequent visits in Heriot Row, where they were living, and sat so long that Nora grew tired of him, though he was a handsome young fellow. “Poor callant, so far away from home, what would he do but come and see me, that am his mother’s near connection?” Mrs. Sinclair would say. And if she could have been angry with her Nora, it would have been for this cause.

“Not so very near, mamma,” Nora would answer. “And if all our connections were to come as often——”

“They all show a very proper feeling, my dear,” was her mother’s reply; and nothing could be more true. Cousins to the fifth degree always turned up to take care of Nora at her balls—to dance with her when there—to cheer her mother’s solitude when she was gone, according to their several ages and sexes. The Sinclairs were a very “well-connected”

family, and it was a circumstance which added much to the comfort of their life.

As for Willy Erskine, he was a very nice young fellow, everybody allowed. He was not rich, to be sure. The Drumthwacket household was known not to be a rich one, and he was the third son. But he was doing what it was the proper thing for a third son to do. It had not been his vocation to go to India, like his second and fourth brothers, though, no doubt, that would have been the best way; and New Zealand and Australia had not been discovered, so to speak, in those days. His eldest brother was at the Bar, and Johnny, the fifth, was to be the clergyman of the family; so that Willy’s lot was clear before him, even had he not been impelled towards it by a naturally scientific turn of mind. He was pursuing his medical studies at Edinburgh University during those years when Nora and her mother came in the winter to Heriot Row. In summer it was quite a practicable thing to walk from Drumthwacket, which was only sixteen miles off, down to Anstruther on one pretence or other,—an expedition which made it quite natural as well as necessary to “look in” at the Gushat-house, somewhere near the time of the early dinner. The fare on Mrs. Erskine’s table was homely, but it never occurred to her to grumble at the frequent visitor, or put on company punctilios, or even a fresh table-cloth, for Willy. The latter was a point upon which the population of the Gushat-house were always very easy in their minds: for no lady in Fife had a better stock of “napery,” and none were more delicately, femininely alive to the beauties of clean linen. Besides which, everybody in those days washed at home, and clean table-cloths cost nothing—a matter of primitive luxury unknown in our days. Young Erskine would look in, and nobody was otherwise than pleased to see him; other people, too, “looked in” on other days. Sometimes there would be two or three strangers, equally unexpected and welcome at the widow’s table. There was glorious fish, fresh from the sea—cod with great milk-white flakes, and the delicious haddocks of the Firth, which cost next to nothing, to take the edge off the wholesome appetites of these young people; and savoury old Scotch dishes, such as exist no more—Scotch collops, brown and fragrant; chickens, which were not called chickens, but “hens;” dainty curries, in which the homely rural gentry, with sons and brothers by the score in India, were as great critics as the old Indians themselves. To the board thus spread the country neighbours were always kindly welcome; and Mrs. Sinclair took no special notice of the frequency with which young Erskine made his appearance. If Nora was more observant, she was also more tolerant than she had been in Edinburgh. She did not even seem to dislike it much when chance brought her in contact with the young student among the rocks, as sometimes happened. Though that age was not so advanced as our own, it was still possible, even at so rudimentary an epoch, to make good use of the sea-coast, and the marine creatures which the young



man was studying, to further such encounters. He called them by their Latin names when he walked with Nora up to the Gushat-house, and Mrs. Sinclair respected his habits of research. "It's little good he'll get out of the tangle on the rocks," she would say, "but it shows a diligent mind." At which praise Willy would blush, and Nora smile.

But there was no haste, no rush upon the inevitable, no rash effort to put it to the touch, to win or lose it all. He would have lost his love altogether had he been precipitate. Nora was the only child of her mother, who was a widow. She had tender love to guard her, and full freedom to do as she pleased. She was the favourite of all the fisher-folk, the beauty of the town, admired, imitated, caressed, and followed, wherever she went. The Gushat-house was the cheeriest little house in all the country-side, and Mrs. Sinclair was the most indulgent mother: naturally, therefore, Nora had no wish, not the most distant inclination, to sacrifice all this to become any man's wife. Love lays hold upon some people with a violent hand, but with others has to go softly, and eschew all turbulence. Nora began to like young Erskine's society. She began to feel a certain lightness diffuse itself over her heart when she saw him coming down the long country road, crossing the shadow of the trees. When winter came, and these same trees were bare, and the journey to Heriot Row drew near, it was a pleasure to her to remember that Erskine was already there. Not that she went so far as to form a good resolution to be kinder to him, to permit his attendance more willingly. She was only pleased to think that he would be at hand to be snubbed or encouraged as the humour might seize her—a very improper spirit, as the youthful reader will perceive. But Nora was far from being a perfect young woman. Thus things went on in a leisurely way. There was no hurry; even Willy himself, though he was deeply in earnest, was aware that there was no hurry. If any competitor should appear ready to carry her off suddenly, then Willy Erskine would wake up too, and fly violent and desperate to the assault. But no such catastrophe was threatening. Nora, everybody said, was "fancy free." Even her saucy sallies, her little caprices, proved this. Her lovers were her friends, in a quaint rural sort of way. She did not wish to cast any of them from the latter eminence by regarding them in the former capacity. She might go on wandering through the metaphorical forest for years, some people said, and take the crooked stick at the end. Whether he was the crooked stick or not, Willy Erskine, like a wise general, kept a wary eye on her tactics, and held himself ready to take advantage of any weakening in her defences. It had begun years ago, when they were boy and girl; it might last till they were middle-aged for anything that could be said to the contrary. He was always at Nora's disposal, to do anything she chose to ask him, and she was always friendly to Willy, ready to stand up for him when he was absent, and to give him the most solemn good advice when he permitted her the

opportunity. Nora might have been his grandmother, to judge by the prudent counsel she gave him, and would try his devotion the next moment by laying upon him the most frivolous and troublesome commissions. Thus the time went on imperceptibly, marking its progress on these two at least by no remarkable events. Nora was bridesmaid so often to her youthful friends that she began to declare loudly that she had forestalled her own luck, and would never be a bride—but without any sort of faith in her own prediction. Yet, though this state of things was a very pleasant one, it was a necessity that, one time or other, it should come to an end.

The end was brought about, as it happened, by another event, of great importance to young Erskine, and in which Nora and her mother, as in duty bound, took a lively interest. Willy's professional studies came to a conclusion, and the ladies went, well pleased, to witness the curious ceremonial at which he was "capped," as it is called—the outward sign and token of his having attained the dignity of M.D. He had passed his examinations with credit, and his friends were proud. At night there was a little party of Fife folk at Heriot Row. The good people went to tea and supper, and made one substantial but light, and one still more substantial and very heavy, meal. Then the health of the young doctor was drunk with kindly enthusiasm. "Willy, take you my advice and get a wife next," said one of the genial guests, and the suggestion was received with general applause.

"A doctor without a wife is like rigging without a ship," said another adviser. "There's two professions that must aye have the ballast of a petticoat. As for a soldier, like your brother Sandy, he's better without one, if he could be brought to think it; and John will be the laird, and he can take his time. But a minister and a doctor have no choice. You'll ask us to your wedding next, if you'll be guided by me."

"What Captain Maitland says is very true," said Mrs. Sinclair: "a doctor's never well received in families till he's a married man. You're but young, and there's no hurry except for that. When I was a young woman myself, and needing doctors, not even a family connection would have led me to call in a man that was without a wife."

"Here's a man that has no mind to be without a wife," cried Willy. Perhaps he was a little excited with drinking his own health, or some one else's. "I wish it only depended on me——"

"You can but try," said one, patting him on the shoulder. "Faint heart never won fair lady," said another. "I would not wonder if it was all settled a year ago!" said a third; and various looks, some veiled, some openly significant, were turned upon the corner where, amid a little knot of girls, Nora sat apart. It was no revelation to Nora; but the thought of being thus openly indicated set her pride up in arms. She to marry Willy Erskine for any reason whatsoever, except her sovereign grace

and pleasure! She to take him because he was a doctor and wanted a wife! She had to dance the first reel with him, when the room was cleared after supper, and Mrs. Sinclair went to the piano—partly because he was the hero of the occasion and she the daughter of the house, partly because they were such old friends; but she would scarcely grant the young fellow a look even when her hand was in his in the pretty, animated dance. And Willy in his excitement held that soft hand longer, and clasped it closer than was at all needful. Nora's girlish temper blazed up; but he could not see it, the foolish boy. His own heat and ardour long suppressed, the pleasant intoxication of all those friendly plaudits and flattering good wishes, the seduction of the moment when all were gone but himself, and the careful mistress of the house had begun to put away the remnants of the feast and lock up her "garde-vin," were too much for him. Willy was so far left to himself as to arrest Nora in the hall when she had said good-night to the last guest. He was by way of leaving himself, when he stopped her and took her hand. "Say a kind word to me, Nora," he cried, drawing her into the dimly-lighted little room behind, which was called the library. Mrs. Sinclair was in the dining-room close by, with her confidential handmaiden putting away the things. They could hear her voice where they stood, and there was no harm in this little chance interview. "Say a kind word to me, Nora," he pleaded; "you know how fond I am of you. I've never thought of another since I was a boy at school. I've looked forward to this for years and years."

"What have you looked forward to, Mr. Erskine?" said Nora, with the insolence of power.

"Nora—Nora, don't speak like that!" cried the young man. "I'm not worth it, but you must take me—you know you must take me; you're all the world to me. What do I care for my degree or anything else but for you? Say you'll take a poor fellow, Nora? You know you are all the world to me."

"Indeed, I know nothing of the kind," said Nora. "I am very sleepy, and I don't care much about your degree. Must take you, indeed! I never do anything that I *must* do. What with their toasts, and their talk, and their nonsense, they've turned your head. Good-night."

And she went away from him, while he stood and looked after her stupefied. "Nora!" he said, in a voice of such pain that Mrs. Sinclair heard, and left the "things" on the table. She came in while Nora stood still, haughty and offended, at the door. The mother saw at once what was the matter. She thought it was a lover's quarrel, and she saw there had been enough of it for the night.

"I thought you had gone with the Lindsays, Willy," she said, looking at him in her motherly way, "and you must be wearied and fit for your bed. What's Nora making her little *moue* at now? But never mind her, my man; to-morrow's a new day."

"Yes, to-morrow's a new day," cried Willy. "I'll take no thought of what I've heard to-night. To-morrow I'm coming back."

And with that he rushed away. As for Nora, she flew up-stairs, and went to bed, that she might not come in for that little sermon which was on her mother's lips. When she had shut herself into her own room she had a good cry. She could not have told any one the reason of her perversity. She was angry with herself and Willy, and the guests who had put such nonsense in his head, and all the world. *Must* take him; very likely! If she, Nora Sinclair, ever had anything to say to a man who came to her with such a plea! She paused on the verge of a petulant vow. Perhaps, on the whole, it would be as well not to make any oaths on the subject. And, luckily, at that moment she fell asleep, which was the easiest way out of the dilemma. To-morrow would be, as Mrs. Sinclair said, a new day.

But, unfortunately, to-morrow is not always a new day. When Nora got up in the chilly spring morning she was, on the whole, rather more irritated and petulant than she had been the evening before. As for Mrs. Sinclair, it was her fixed opinion that the young folk should be left to themselves to make up their little matters. "They know each other's ways best," she said; "older folk do more harm than good when they interfere." So when Willy came in pale and breathless, the kind woman withdrew herself that the two might get it over undisturbed. It was not a new day for young Erskine any more than it was for Nora. It was a feverish supplement to last night. He had not perhaps gone to bed calmly after all his excitement as a girl has to do. There was a *rere-supper* somewhere to which his friends had dragged him, and where probably Willy's brain had been heated by strong drinks. The morning found him parched with mental impatience and suspense, as well as with a certain degree of bodily feverishness and misery. It seemed to his heated eyes as if Nora meant to jilt him after all his devotion. He swore a big oath to himself as he rushed along to Heriot Row. "If she'll not take me now, after all," said Willy, "by—I'll go off to sea, and I'll never be heard of more." In this *mutual mood* the two met. It was not an amiable interview on either side. The young lover took up precisely the line of argument which was most prejudicial to him. He pleaded his faithful services—his devotion which had lasted for years. He established a claim upon Nora, which she was not the girl to put up with. And she, on her side, scornfully denied any claim he had upon her. "If that is what you call love," said the indignant maiden, "to follow a girl about, whether she likes or not, and then to tell her she *must* take you, to pay you for it!" This, alas, was not the way of settling their affairs.

"Nora," cried the young man, desperate, "this is the moment that's to settle my life. It's little matter for you, but for me it's life or death. I'm not asking you to take me now—say a year, say even two years, I'll be content; but I have to know—Nora,

bide a moment; if you turn me away without any hope—by—! There's the *Pretty Peggy* sails from Anster on Saturday. I'll go to Greenland in her, and never see you more."

"And why should I want to see you more?" said Nora. "What do I care for your *Pretty Peggy*? It will do you a great deal of good, Mr. Erskine. It will teach you that you can't have everything your own way."

"Is this your last word, Nora?" cried the poor

fellow, with glistening eyes. If she had looked him in the face, Nora's heart would have given way. But she felt her weakness, and would not look him in the face. She stood by the table, turning over and over in her hand an Indian toy of carved ivory, with her eyes fixed upon it, as if it was the intricacies of the pattern that involved life and death,—and then she said slowly, while the blood seemed to ebb away from her heart, "I have nothing more to say."



Looking out for the *Pretty Peggy*.

In another moment the door shut violently, and Willy Erskine was gone. The sound went through the house like a thunderclap, and threw down with its violent concussion the castle of cards in which Nora had been entrenching herself. She sank down upon a chair, stupified, and listened to the step that went echoing along the street. Was he gone? Was he really gone, and for ever? Gone to Greenland in the *Pretty Peggy*, into the ice where men and ships perished, into the whaling boats where they sank

and were lost for ever,—should she never see him more?

"You've made the bed, and you must lie on it," said Mrs. Sinclair, when she heard all, with an indignation that was soon lost in sympathy. But Nora would not give way either to the sympathy or the indignation. She declared steadily that she would do the same over again if it was in her power. "What right had he to come making claims, and speaking of his rights to me?" she said. "If a lad



follows a girl, does that give him a right to her—whether or no?" This was said with burning eyes into which tears refused to come. But yet Nora shed tears enough over it. She took immense pains privately to find out when the *Pretty Peggy* sailed, and to know if she had shipped a doctor before she left Anster pier. Not for her life would she have asked the doctor's name, but she satisfied herself so far. And when the fact could no longer be doubted, her heart grew so sick that she could not go home. The Sinclairs had friends "in England"—a vague sort of expression used by the untravelled Scotch then, as untravelled islanders now—a-days talk of "the Continent." Nora persuaded her mother that it would be pleasant to "go south," and pay the long-promised visit. She was glad to go away, glad to be anywhere out of the range of those people and places with which Willy Erskine's name was so closely connected. But the other day it seemed he had been so jubilant, so full of good prospects and high hopes. Now he was out upon the Northern seas, surgeon in a whaling ship, like any poor student or broken man. And he Drumthwacket's son! and whose fault was it all? Nora was ashamed to confront even the familiar rocks that knew him so well—that knew how she had met him (by accident), and strayed with him along the sea-verge, with the salt spray now and then dashed into their fresh faces, and the surge rising to their feet. She dragged her home-loving mother about from one "connection" to another all the summer through, enjoying the visits but little, poor child. As for Mrs. Sinclair, a British matron of the present day would not be more disconsolate, nor feel herself more alien in the heart of French society than was the Scottish gentlewoman among her southern connections. Their ways, their accent, their mode of living, were all discordant to her. "If I were to live all my life among those English," she said, "I think I would rather die." Her soul longed for the tents of Jacob and the dwellings of Jerusalem. "But if I were not to humour my own bairn," added Mrs. Sinclair, with pathos, "who should humour her?" Nora was her only child; somehow or other she had made a mistake in her young life. Clouds had come up over the sun at the moment when that sun should have been brightest. Her mother could have given her the best of good advice, but she chose to give her something better instead—she "humoured" Nora. She was her tender partizan, right or wrong. She took up her cause and supported her silently against her own reproaches and all the world. And that is the best way of healing the wounded, if their friends but knew.

It was the end of summer before they returned to the Gushat-house. And then, whether it was that they were unexpected, or whether from her misdeeds towards Willy Erskine, as Nora thought, few people came to see them at first, and nobody so much as mentioned the Drumthwacket family. The name of Erskine was never, as Nora thought, named before her; and she felt herself more guilty still as she

seemed thus to read her own condemnation in the eyes of others. But now the turn of the season had arrived; when she cast wistful looks from the corner of the garden up the long country road, going "north," as those geographical seafaring populations described it, a leaf would now and then flicker down through the sunny air, a sign that autumn had come. A few weeks more, and the *Pretty Peggy* might flutter up the Firth with all her sails set, like a fine lady coming into a ball-room, as the sailors delighted to say; and if Nora penitent, with softness in her eyes, were by, could any one doubt that the eager face of the ship's doctor would expand too, and that the evil days would come to an end? No one could have doubted it but Nora. It was as certain that it would all be made up as that the *Pretty Peggy* would come safe out of the icy seas. To be sure, ships were lost there sometimes, sometimes detained among the ice. But look what a season it has been! Even the men's wives were easy in their minds, and sung by their wheels, or mended the nets at their cottage doors, and looked over the smooth Firth with contented hearts. A week or two more, and the seamen, with their wages, and their curiosities, and their rejoicing would have come home.

There was not a man's wife in the *Pretty Peggy* who was so anxious as Nora. But then it was her fault. It was she who had sent him to sea—he who was no seaman, he whom a wealthier lot awaited. And perhaps he would look bitterly upon the woman whose caprice had wrought him so much harm. This was the thought that made her heart ache, and made the days so long to her. She used to walk out to the pier to watch the sunset reflections, and listen in silence to the prognostications of the fishers and seamen about. When they prophesied a gale, Nora's heart would beat wild with alarm; when they gave their word the storm was past, a hush as of a consoled child would come over her. At last there came a speck on the horizon, upon which all those ancient mariners fixed their telescopes. They exchanged opinions about her rig, and her hull, and her manner of sailing, till Nora standing by was half crazed with suspense. At last the news flew through the town, waking up all the wynds and cottages. It was the *Pretty Peggy* at last.

It would be vain to describe the excitement into which Nora, like many another woman, rose at the news. The other women were the sailors' wives, who had a right to be moved. She had no such right. She had never spoken even to her mother of the *Pretty Peggy*. She had been too proud at first to betray the smallest interest in the movements of her lost love; and she did not even know whether Mrs. Sinclair was aware that Willy was coming with the returning seamen out of the icy seas. She had to invent a reason for her anxiety as the ship drew near the port. "Willy Morrison is in her, mamma," said Nora. "I'd like to go down and see them come in. His mother will be so happy." Willy Morrison's mother had been Nora's nurse, and that was her excuse.

"Well, well," said Mrs. Sinclair with an impatience unusual to her, "I wanted you at home this afternoon; but Nancy will be proud to see you have a warm heart to your foster-brother. Be home as soon as you can. I would not be surprised if some friend was to look into tea."

Nora gave her mother a startled look, of which Mrs. Sinclair took no notice. She looked as if she had her secret too; and most probably she knew as well as her daughter did who was coming up the tranquil Firth in the returning ship. Did her mother expect him too? Could it be possible, after all the tragic hours that were past, that things should fall so calmly into the old routine, and Willy Erskine, after his voyage, look in to tea? She did not know if she walked on air or solid ground when she made her way down again to the pier. If that were to be the end of it, of what use had been all the agonies of those silent months? Life seemed to swim before her like a dream and confused phantasmagoria, as she thought, but yet a subtle sense of happiness was gathering at her heart. He was coming so soon; he was so near; and all those ghosts would roll up their gloomy wings and disappear out of sight, when Willy Erskine once more looked in at the Gushat-house. She went quickly down along the half-deserted road to the pier where the women were all crowding. The *Pretty Peggy* could not reach the harbour yet for more than an hour; but still to be so much nearer her, to be ready to meet the men and hear that all was well, five minutes earlier, was compensation enough for the wives. They made pleasant little speeches to Nora as she came down among them. "Ah, Miss Nora, the day will come when you'll be looking out for a man of your ain," said one. "And I hope with a' my heart it'll be a good man and a pleasant day," added another. "But Miss Nora's man will never be a sea-faring man like ours, to make her heart sair," said a third. "Unless it was a grand captain of a frigate in a' his gold lace," was the ambitious aspiration of Nancy Morrison. "Sure I am, I didna bring up a winsome young lady for less than that." She was a favourite, and this was the pleasant chatter that passed, as she went among them, from lip to lip.

"I want to see Willy come in from his first voyage, nurse," said Nora. What a lying, wicked little speech it was! and what a true one! but before Nancy had time to answer, one of the men on the outlook threw down his telescope with a groan—rather the glass slid out of his hands. "Go out o' my way, women, wi' your cackling," he said, as he stumbled down. "Oh, Lord, and their mother that canna stir a foot from her bed!" With this the old sailor turned his back on the advancing ship, and sat down on the edge of the pier, and hid his face in his hands. This action alarmed the entire community: for Peter Rodger was well known to have two sons in the *Pretty Peggy*. Two or three of the women crowded round him to ask what he meant, when another of the men gave a sudden cry. "My God, the flag's at the half-mast!" he exclaimed.

A sudden horror fell upon the group. It fell upon the town instinctively in the twinkling of an eye; the news flew by that strange electricity which is quicker than the telegraph. It was a sunny afternoon, the Firth was like glass, the sky was blue—nothing but the white clouds above, and the soft gliding sails below disturbed the glistening surface of the sea. The ship, with its white sails, came softly on before a slight but favourable breeze; but the faces of the little crowd grew pale in the sunshine, and a shudder ran through them. There was a pause, and every heart stood still. "She's got the garland on the topmast; she's made a good voyage," said a younger sailor under his breath. "Oh, lad, how dare ye speak," cried one of the women, "when she's bringing death maybe to your mother or to me?"

The strain of the suspense was terrible as they stood and watched: some of the poor wives fell on their knees and prayed aloud—as if that would bring to life the dead man, probably long ago committed to the safe-keeping of the sea; some sat down and began to rock themselves, crying silently as if their individual fate had been sealed. As for Nancy Morrison, she stood rigid with a face as pale as stone, and with big dilated eyes watched the ship that was bringing her life or death. Nora was shocked and disturbed, as was natural. Her heart went forth in a certain passionate pity for the one, whoever it was, upon whom the blow was about to fall; but she did not feel the same overpowering anxiety as that which moved the others. She went softly to her old nurse, and put her arm round the poor woman—"Oh, Nancy, take courage," she cried; "don't think it's him!"

"Let me be! oh, let me be!" cried Nancy.

There was no one there in a condition to take comfort or give attention to anything but one.

And the ship came so slowly, as it seemed to everybody now. The Firth lit up with all the glorious reflections of the sunset; the *May* rose dark upon the blazing water with the iron skeleton that held at night its fire signal; the *Bass* lay like an uncouth shell against the dim outline of land on the other side, and the long sun-rays slanted and fell tenderly across the water. Then the horrible excitement of the watchers was roused into a sharper crisis still. A boat darted forth from the shore with six stout oarsmen, to the slowly gliding ship. Could it be a ship of death, like that one that the Ancient Mariner saw against the sun? Could there have been pestilence on board? It came on gliding, as the other vessel must have done when "the men all light, the seraph men," brought her near the port. These wild thoughts passed through Nora's mind alone. There came into it a curious vague wonder whether it might have been Providence, and not she, that sent Willy Erskine into such a ship. She seemed to see him on the deck with all, or almost all, the authority in his hands—the saviour of most of the disabled crew; healer, ruler, hero; such was the strange vision that glided before her eyes as she too, eagerly watched the boat. The thought of his



supposed devotion made Nora unselfish too. She ceased to tremble about their personal meeting. She kept eye and hand firm, to be ready to give help and succour to her who might be smitten, whoever she might be.

When the boat came back, and got within hailing distance, the excitement grew terrible. Some of the poor wives threw themselves among the rocks to get the news a moment earlier. Peter Rodger stood on the highest ledge, with his broad hand curved like a trumpet round his eager ear. Nora placed herself behind her nurse, instinctively, for she loved the woman. But the awful strain of all their ears and senses made the first cry unintelligible to them. Twice the vague shout came over the waters before it could be comprehended. Then it was caught up and echoed by a hundred voices—"Only the doctor!" That was what they said.

Only the doctor! There was a shout, and then a cry, sharp with joy, from all those women. Joy! though it was still death that was coming. They clasped each other's hands; they wept aloud; they cried out, in the relief of their deliverance. The whole community, every living creature about began to breathe, and babble, and sob forth thanksgiving. One figure alone fell forward against the wall on which Nancy Morrison had been leaning. Nora was stupefied. It was like a great rock falling suddenly down upon her out of the peaceful sky. She shrank, and gave one wail and shudder, and then it came, crushing the heart and flesh. The doctor! He had said true—he was never to see him more.

"Miss Nora, cheer up," said Nancy, crying, and laughing, and shivering with joy. "Dinna take it so sair to heart. It's her nerves, my bonnie woman. But they're a' safe, noo, baith lads and men. It's but the doctor—do ye no hear what they say?"

Then Nora rose up desperate, and turned her stony face upon them. "Do you think there's none to break their hearts for him?" she cried with a wild indignation. "Do you think there's no mother, no woman watching? Be silent, ye cruel women! How dare you tell me it's only *him*?"

Then they all looked at her with pathetic faces, gathering round her where she stood—she who did not know what she was saying. Impatiently she turned from their looks. What could sympathy, or anything, do for her? What did it matter? "Let me be!" she cried, as Nancy had cried. Let her alone! that was all she could say.

"Eh, Miss Nora, if we had kent the doctor was anything to you!" cried one of the pitiful women. Nora turned round with a certain wild fierceness almost before the words were said.

"And who said he was anything to me?" she asked, with a strange scorn of herself, and them; he was nothing to her. She could not even wear black for him, or let anybody know she

mourned. She shook herself clear of the pitying people she could not tell how. Like a blind creature, seeing nothing, with an instinct only to get home anyhow, she went straight forward, not knowing where she placed her foot: and thus walked sightless, open-eyed, and miserable—into Willy Erskine's arms.

The cry she uttered rang in the ears of all the watching population for years after. They forgot the ship and the men who were so near at hand to gather round this curious group. Nora fell forward into her lover's arms like an inanimate thing. One shock she had borne, and it had taken all her strength—the other she could not bear. For the first time in her life she lost consciousness. The light had gone out of her eyes before—now the very breath died on her lips. Mrs. Sinclair, who had come down to the pier with him to find her child, could never be sufficiently thankful that Willy was a doctor and knew precisely what to do. He carried his love all the way along the pier hampered by eager offers of help, and still more anxious comments of sympathy, to Nancy Morrison's cottage on the shore, his heart full of remorse and exultation. Though he had long ago forgotten his threat about the *Pretty Peggy*, still it was quite true that he had come, like a conspirator, to surprise from Nora's honest eyes, from her candid face, some revelation of her true feelings. She had so revealed them now, as that they never could be denied again; and though it was not Willy's fault, he was remorseful in his tenderness. He had never set foot on the *Pretty Peggy*. He had forgotten so entirely even the use he had made of her name, that he believed, like Mrs. Sinclair, that it was kindness to her foster-brother which had taken Nora to the pier. Instead of an unprofitable visit to the Greenland seas, he had been settling himself very advantageously in an inland town, where his "connections" in the county were sure to be of use to him; and after this interval, with the mother's concurrence, had come with sober determination not to be discouraged, to know what Nora meant, and what his fate was to be. All this Nora learnt afterwards by degrees with wrath and happiness. The doctor who had died was a dissipated old man, of a class too common in the Greenland ships. "I kent weel that doited body could never be anything to Miss Nora," cried Nancy Morrison, drying her eyes. The mystery was cleared up in a fashion to all the admiring and sympathetic population round when Willy Erskine appeared on the scene; and yet nobody knew what it meant except Nora and he.

She was very angry and she was very happy, as we have said. But she had taken all power of resistance, had she wished to resist, out of her own hands. And the story came to the usual end of such stories, and there is nothing more to say.